

Believing at Will and the Will to Believe the Truth

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ABSTRACT: I defend the possibility of a form of doxastic voluntarism, by criticizing an argument advanced recently by Pamela Hieronymi against the possibility of believing at will. Conceiving of believing at will as believing immediately in response to practical reasons, Hieronymi claims that no form of control we exercise over our beliefs measures up to this standard. While there is a form of control Hieronymi thinks we exercise over our beliefs, “evaluative control,” she claims it does not give us the power to believe at will because it consists in the consideration of reasons “constitutive” of believing that are not, at the same time, practical reasons. I argue that evaluative control *does* amount to the ability to believe at will, because there is a practical reason the consideration of which also constitutes some acts of believing: the value of believing the truth. The form of voluntarism I defend is consistent with a robust evidentialism.

1. Introduction

There are two distinct strains of recent opposition to the thesis of doxastic voluntarism, the idea that there is an important sense in which we exercise voluntary control over our beliefs. One strain, exemplified by the work of William Alston (1988) and Alvin Plantinga (1993) opposes voluntarism as part of a campaign against what it takes to be the presuppositions of evidentialist, internalistic epistemology. If we do not exercise voluntary control over our beliefs, it suggests, then because “ought” implies “can,” there is no sense in which evidentialist “oughts” govern our belief. We cannot legitimately judge beliefs we cannot help but believe, and so evidentialist norms facilitating such judgment are inappropriate. Oddly, another strain of opposition to voluntarism comes from the pro-evidentialist camp. Recently Jonathan Adler (2002), Nishi Shah (2006), and Pamela Hieronymi (2006, forthcoming) have offered arguments against voluntarism out of concern that the idea of believing at will implies the ability to choose a belief regardless of the available evidence, an idea they think lends credence to anti-evidentialism. They argue that no mental state adopted regardless of the available evidence can count as a form of belief, since belief by its nature aims at the truth. This helps support evidentialism by undermining the very coherence of an anti-evidentialist position that regards as permissible such seemingly impossible mental states.

In this paper I wish to examine and critique Hieronymi’s arguments in particular. I mention that there are both anti- and pro-evidentialist arguments against voluntarism because I do not want my criticism of Hieronymi to suggest support for the kind of voluntarism that many anti-voluntarists see as aiding anti-evidentialism. In defending the possibility of believing at will, I am doing so with sincerely evidentialist intentions, with the hope to *improve* the case for evidentialism. On my view, the control we might exercise over our beliefs can help account for why some beliefs are justified or unjustified by the evidence. Indeed I think such control is presupposed by the concept of “justification.” But I think there is still wisdom in the view that there are certain forms of “belief” at will that are conceptually impossible. In particular, I hope that my account of believing at will helps better delineate between *unjustified* belief and brazenly anti-evidential non-belief.

To make this case, I will begin by presenting Hieronymi’s argument against the possibility of believing at will. Here I will show how her argument depends on an assumption about the available forms of response to practical reasons. In the section that follows, I will argue that if we expand our roster of types of practical reasons to include a recognition of the practical value of the truth, Hieronymi’s assumption can be challenged, and a new

argument in favor of the possibility of believing at will can be defended, one which is also consistent with a robust form of evidentialism. In this paper, at least, I do not wish to defend the idea that *all* beliefs are formed voluntarily, only that some significant beliefs are or can be. Since Hieronymi claims that such voluntary belief formation is conceptually impossible, and since she is not alone in making this claim, I take it that by questioning her assumption about the available forms of responding to practical reasons, I will have advanced a significant philosophical claim.

2. Hieronymi's critique of believing at will

Much to her credit, Hieronymi (2006, 2009) does not deny that we control our beliefs. Rather, she claims that some control is not voluntary in the sense that ordinary intentional actions are. Ordinarily, healthy subjects can raise their right hand at will, but cannot just believe that it is raining outside at will. And yet, Hieronymi points out, we often seem to deliberate in order to answer questions, like whether or not it is likely to rain. Insofar as the result of this deliberation is a belief, believing is still under our control. Hieronymi argues that the sense in which belief is under our control is simply a different sense in which raising one's right hand is. Taking a cue from Jonathan Bennett, she describes the kind of control involved in raising one's right hand as *acting at will*, which she and Bennett claim requires the ability to *act immediately in response to practical reasons*.

Importantly, and further to her credit, Hieronymi specifies the sense of "immediacy" involved in actions done at will. She does not reject the possibility of believing at will or voluntarily for the reason others do, on the grounds that forming a belief is not a "basic" one-step action like raising one's hand. As Hieronymi points out, we can voluntarily prepare dinner even though it is a multi-step process, and it would not be more voluntary if it could be reduced to a one-step process. To say that something is done at will only if it is done *immediately*, then, is not a simple matter of the number of steps involved in the action, but the *kind* of steps.

According to Hieronymi, there are two considerations that might be called "reasons for believing *p*." There are those which bear on the question of whether *p*, and those which bear on the question of whether the belief that *p* would be worth having. The former are first-order considerations about facts that bear on the truth or falsehood of *p*, while the latter are second-order considerations about the practical merit of holding the belief. It is one thing to have a reason that bears on the question of whether Alice likes William, but it is another to have a reason that bears on the question of whether it would be useful for William to believe that Alice likes him. William might have no evidence to think that she actually likes him, but he might at the same time have good reason to think that if he were to believe that she likes him, he would be more confident in his dealings with her, and perhaps increase the likelihood that she actually does come to like him.¹ Hieronymi calls the first a "content-related" reason, while the second is an "attitude-related" reason. She allows that these two types of reason may sometimes overlap. In particular, she notes in passing that because true beliefs can be good to have, knowing that the content of a belief is true may also give one an attitude-related reason to form the belief.

Part of what divides believing that *p* from other mental states that involve taking *p* as true (such as accepting *p* for the sake of argument) is that believing that *p* involves a commitment to the truth of *p*, such that we

¹ Readers will recognize this as similar to a case presented by William James in "The Will to Believe."

can ask why another person believes that *p*, or criticize another person for believing that *p* if one does not think it is true.² Of the two things we call “reasons for believing,” only one is relevant to kinds of commitment that follow from believing *p*: content-related reasons. So Hieronymi counts content-related reasons as “constitutive reasons.” To accept a set of content-related reasons for believing *p* as convincing just is to believe *p*.

What, then, of attitude-related reasons? Hieronymi says that recognizing these as supporting a given belief does not constitute believing. William’s recognition that it would be good to believe that Alice likes him is not therein for him to believe that she does. Hieronymi calls those attitude-related reasons which do not overlap with content-related reasons “non-constitutive,” or “extrinsic” reasons.³

All of this is relevant to showing what it is to believe at will—and whether we do in fact believe at will—because it helps us to understand what it is to believe *immediately* in response to practical reasons.⁴ Following Bennett’s account, to *believe* at will would be to believe immediately in response to practical reasons:

Bennett defined “practical reasons” as reasons which bear on what to make true, as opposed to reasons that bear on what is true. Presumably, reasons which bear on whether to make it the case that you believe do so by showing something good, in some way, about believing, without showing the belief true. *So presumably practical reasons for a belief are extrinsic reasons for that belief. To believe at will, then, one would have to be able to believe for extrinsic reasons.* (2006, 52, emphasis added)

Hieronymi goes on to argue that we cannot believe immediately in response to an extrinsic reason, and that therefore there is no such thing as believing at will. She argues this first by outlining two genuine forms of control we do have over our belief, and then by showing that neither of them counts as believing immediately in response to an extrinsic reason.

To begin with, Hieronymi allows that we can exercise “managerial control” over our beliefs by placing ourselves in conditions under which it is likely that we will come to acquire a belief. For instance, if William does not at the moment believe that Alice likes him, he might still be able to acquire this belief by putting himself into a less than critical state (say by having one too many drams of whiskey) in which he might be more likely to consider ordinary gestures of politeness as signs of friendship or affection, and as a result come to believe that she likes him. If he thinks it would good to believe that she likes him, he could, then have a practical reason to drink too much in order to make it easier to believe that she likes him. But William could not form the belief that Alice likes him *immediately* in response to consideration of this extrinsic reason. In order actually to believe the first-order belief

² William might suppose hypothetically that Alice likes him in order to deduce the consequences of the proposition and to see if they hold, to confirm or disconfirm the claim. In doing so, William is not actually believing that Alice likes him.

³ She does think there are overlapping reasons: at least one type of attitude-related reason for believing may also be content-related: any factor that shows a self-referential belief like “This belief is good to have” to be a good belief to have would also thereby show it to be true.

⁴ Bennett and Hieronymi’s view counts as a form of reasons-responsiveness compatibilism. While I agree that freely willed acts essentially involve the faculty of reason, it is notoriously difficult to formulate a form of compatibilism that avoids the dilemma between conflating freedom with rationality on one hand, and allowing that psychotic acts count as free on the other. For a critique of compatibilism applied to the question of doxastic freedom, see Bayer (Unpublished--b). Nonetheless, I think even if compatibilism is mistaken, I think it is correct that the voluntariness of beliefs is due to their responsiveness to reasons, even though I think one’s general responsiveness to evidence itself is more basically volitional in a way that is not a response to any other consideration.

that she likes him, he must first act upon himself to bring about the belief. Because he is not forming his belief immediately in response to reasons, he is not believing at will or forming the belief voluntarily.

What Hieronymi calls “evaluative control” is an immediate form of control. Simply by answering positively the question of whether *p*, we therein believe *p*. Evaluative control is immediate because to answer whether *p* we need only recognize the constitutive reasons (the evidence) for *p* as supporting *p*. If Alice considers the evidence as supporting the belief that William likes him, she therein believes that he likes him. And yet even while evaluative control is a form of control over our beliefs, Hieronymi does not think it counts as believing *at will*, because it is not the kind of control that involves an immediate response to a *practical* reason. Constitutive reasons for *p* do not directly speak to whether or not it would be worthwhile to believe that *p*. Hieronymi assumes that one would believe at will only through an immediate response to a practical, *extrinsic* reason, and extrinsic reasons are those which she assumes do not bear on the answer to the question of whether *p*. Evaluative control is exercised in response to those constitutive reasons that *do* bear on this question, so evaluative control cannot be a form of believing at will.

So, according to Hieronymi, neither of the forms of control we exercise over our beliefs (managerial or evaluative) counts as believing at will. Her case for this conclusion depends crucially on the assumption that *the only practical reasons for believing p are “extrinsic” or non-constitutive reasons*, the practical reasons the consideration of which does not constitute believing that *p*. I will argue that this assumption is mistaken. There is a practical reason for believing the consideration of which is still constitutive of believing itself. Once we identify this practical reason, we will see why it still makes sense to think there is such a thing as believing at will.

3. The will to believe the truth as a practical, constitutive reason for belief

As I remarked earlier, Hieronymi herself notes that “content-related” and “attitude-related” reasons can overlap. She admits that quite often true beliefs are good to have, and so showing that the content of a particular belief is true can show that it is also a good belief to have. But if believing the truth itself can be good, we should consider whether recognizing the value of the truth can be a *practical reason* in response to which one can immediately form beliefs. Of course Hieronymi recognizes that beliefs can be formed in response to practical reasons, she simply does not accept that beliefs formed in this way are formed *immediately* in response to practical reasons, because these reasons are *extrinsic* and not *constitutive* of what it is to believe. So there are two crucial ideas that need to be established to refute Hieronymi and show that it is at least sometimes, in significant ways, possible to form beliefs voluntarily: *first*, that this will to believe the truth is (or at least can be) constitutive of believing itself, and *second*, that acting on the will to believe the truth is (or can be) an immediate response to a practical reason.

3.1 The will to believe the truth partially constitutes the act of believing

Hieronymi considers a reason for belief to be a “consideration, i.e. some fact or proposition, that bears on a question.” So, for instance, Alice might ask a question such as “Does William like me?” She comes to believe that he does when she recognizes evidence as supporting the proposition that he does, and becomes committed to its

truth. Arguably, even the sincere asking of a question presupposes at least some recognition that it is good to know the true answer. We ask questions because the answer is not obvious, and we intend to find it. Answering and even asking questions takes mental work. If Alice only needed to signal her ignorance, she would merely say “I don’t know if William likes me.” But asking questions, unlike merely expressing ignorance, signals and begins to implement an intention to undertake further mental action, and this seems to presuppose the existence of a mental good one wishes to achieve at the cost of this effort. If the form of one’s question is “whether p ” rather than “whether it is good to believe that p ,” it would seem that what one values by asking it is determining the truth of p .

Of course one’s preexisting attitude toward the truth, as expressed through the asking of questions, certainly doesn’t *constitute* one’s believing any more than one’s asking a question before answering it does. But surely *how* and *whether* one goes on to answer a question in light of the evidence depends in part on the extent to which one *continues* to recognize the value of believing the truth. This will to believe the truth must be revitalized with each passing moment. At any given moment we have the choice to raise or lower our level of awareness, to focus on the facts before us or not (Binswanger, 1992). This is one point we need to understand in order to see why the value we place on the truth partially constitutes the very act of believing.

Suppose that Alice generally values believing the truth, and has occasion to ask the question of whether William likes her. But once Alice raises the question of whether he likes her, she immediately knows the possible answers and without much further effort, the implications of each answer. Suppose that if William likes her, she will have the opportunity to begin a relationship, and she knows that doing so will radically change her life, which will not be easy. *If she recognizes the value of believing the truth*, she will fully examine the evidence that William likes her and determine if it fully supports that conclusion. So she needs to consider more evidence than just William’s smile, for example. She needs to search through all of her memories of William and continue to observe and interact with him for some time. But *if she does not recognize the value of believing the truth*, her discomfort about the implications of examining the evidence might overwhelm her, and she might fail to examine it fully. She might leave it as a possibility that he likes her and drift through life never bothering to see if it is actually true. If the stakes are even higher, and a new relationship would disrupt a current relationship, Alice might not only refuse to consider the evidence in full, but form rationalizations that force the evidence to fit conclusions she would otherwise take to be unlikely (e.g., she operates on the prejudice that men flirt for cynical reasons).

In what Hieronymi calls evaluative control, one considers content-related reasons that bear on one’s question of whether p , and in positively answering that question, one *therein* believes p . But whether we give full attention to the evidence that in fact supports p depends on which of several different possible cognitive attitudes we take in our approach to answering the question: either we actively embrace our evidence, we passively wander around or past it, or we actively suppress our awareness of the evidence by distracting ourselves with something else. I want to propose that if, as Hieronymi thinks, answering the question of whether p actually constitutes believing that p , then the will that determines how one answers the question also partially constitutes one’s believing. If true, this would mean that there are constitutive reasons besides content-related reasons.

Critics could concede that our recognition of the value of the truth does indeed influence which beliefs we adopt, but that does not mean this influence is constitutive of believing itself. Indeed there are philosophers (Heil

1982, Audi 2001) who claim that we do have direct control over the ability to engage various methods of inquiry with various degrees of conscientiousness, but that beliefs are merely the products of these actions, not constituted by them.

Interestingly, even though Hieronymi rejects the voluntariness of belief-formation, she claims that the reason for which beliefs are not formed at will is *not* that their formation involves a number of steps. Making dinner also involves a number of steps, but this does not mean that making dinner is involuntary. Still, it is often thought that what constitutes an action is determined by an overarching intention. And philosophers such as Alston (1988) have argued that that in any act of inquiry, we do not know and cannot intend to form a belief with a particular propositional content. In our example, William cannot decide directly to believe that Alice likes him if she has given him plentiful evidence to the contrary—no more than he can suddenly decide to believe that he is an insect rather than a man.

Yet this objection presupposes that in order to have voluntary control over an act, we must have conscious awareness of every conceivably relevant aspect of the outcome of the act. Salmieri and Bayer (forthcoming) have responded to Alston, in my mind quite convincingly, by noting that there are many actions performed voluntarily whose outcomes can be known under more and less specific descriptions. One may, for example, choose to look up Al Kaline's batting average in an almanac without knowing what the specific statistic is going to be before we look. Choosing to look up the figure amounts to choosing to believe whatever specific figure the almanac reveals, though we do not know what it is in advance. So choosing to believe does not require choosing to believe under the description of a specific propositional content; we can intentionally choose under the description of whatever proposition results from the use of some method of inquiry, and it is precisely under this latter description that the belief is subject to epistemic evaluation. Salmieri and Bayer solidify their case against Alston by proposing that believing is best conceived as a mental action that is partially constituted by certain cognitive processes. They contend that even to maintain a belief is to rehearse the process by which it was formed, in that holding a belief involves testing it constantly against the observations it predicts.⁵

Of course the will to believe the truth—one's recognition of the value of the truth—is not a method of grasping the evidence, it is something more basic than that, a willingness to grasp it at all. But I think Salmieri and Bayer's argument would accommodate it as the first and most basic step in the act of believing. As Hieronymi herself frequently notes:

[Y]ou believe *p* just in case you are “committed to *p* as true,” where to be committed to *p* as true is to take *p* to be true in a way that leaves you thus vulnerable. Belief is, I will say, “commitment-constituted.” In sum, I take the thought that belief “aims at truth” or “purports to represent reality”

⁵ This broader understanding of the identity of the act of believing does not, of course, address the question of why there still seem to be many beliefs which, once formed, we cannot abandon: for instance, William cannot believe Alice likes him if he has seen abundant evidence to the contrary. Matthias Steup (2011) has pointed out that the most direct explanation for the inability to change such beliefs is that to do so would be to go against the evidence we already have. But he points out convincingly that this is not yet reason to think that we do not voluntarily control our beliefs. As long as we understand the voluntariness of our beliefs along the same lines as the voluntariness of our actions—as their being the expression of a capacity to respond to reasons rather than the expression of psychosis—then the fact that a belief is so intimately tied to one's evidence is not a sign of being involuntary, but the contrary. I will go further than Steup, however, and describe later how we have the ability to control our awareness of (i.e. our responsiveness to) the evidence, and that this is fundamentally what underpins our ability to control our beliefs.

to mark that fact that to believe that *p* is to be committed to *p* as true—to take *p* to be true in a way that leaves one answerable to certain questions and criticisms.. (2006, 50)

Here Hieronymi herself claims that what *constitutes* belief is a certain commitment. I agree, and suggest that part of this commitment is to the value of truth itself. Hieronymi suggests that we can test whether something is constitutive of an act by considering what the act makes one answerable for. She uses this point to show how a Credamite who acts on himself to *bring about a belief* is answerable to very different reasons than is one who *believes* the same belief. *Why* does the Credamite do something to himself to believe *p*? Because he thinks it would be good to believe *p*. This does not constitute believing because it is not relevant to whether *p*. Now why does a non-Credamite recognize the evidence that points to *p*? In doing so the non-Credamite is not acting on himself as an intermediary to bring about a belief, he is acting on the evidence, as it were. The response to the relevant reason here is *immediate* in Hieronymi's sense: the non-Credamite is still simply asking whether *p*. It's true that the answer to this question is not a content-related reason that bears on whether *p*. But it *is* that the non-Credamite *cares* whether *p*. That's just what a commitment is: commitment is a normatively-tinged act, and not value neutral. Recognizing the value of the truth, I suggest, is the *fundamental* constituting act that separates belief from mere pragmatic acceptance.

It is, of course, controversial to think of belief as partially constituted by mental actions and even commitments. And not all beliefs are formed with explicit intentions to adopt methods of inquiry aimed at determining the truth of specific propositions. But if it is at least plausible that some are, then the commitment to the value of the truth would at least *sometimes* be a constitutive but not a content-related reason for belief. In responding to this commitment, one would be responding immediately to a reason. But before we can claim that this means beliefs can sometimes be formed voluntarily, we would also need to show that the value of the truth is also a *practical reason*.

3.2. *The will to believe the truth is a practical reason*

It is plausible to think that the value that believers assign to truth in committing themselves to their beliefs need not be *practical* value. Some could distinguish between practical and epistemic value, for instance. I will go on to argue that the value of the truth is practical, and often at least implicitly recognized as such. But I should note that even if the value of the truth is not practical value, conceding that it is a value at all could form the basis of a revision of the present argument that could account for the voluntariness of belief. Steup (2011) suggests that the voluntariness of beliefs might just as easily be attributed to the fact that beliefs are responses to *epistemic* reasons. Generally, Steup contends that whatever reasons we have to regard physical actions as voluntary can be applied in parallel to the voluntariness of beliefs. So while Hieronymi and Bennett would be correct to maintain that the voluntariness of *physical actions* is attributable to their being responsive to practical reasons, the voluntariness of *belief* could be seen as attributable to reasons proper to belief, i.e. epistemic reasons.

I sympathize with Steup's argument, especially insofar as it is motivated by an attempt to distance voluntarism from pragmatism. The worry is that if we could choose beliefs simply in response to a practical reason, there would be a significant sense in which a belief could be *justified* by this purely practical factor, leaving open the possibility that beliefs formed apart from or even against the evidence could be justified, contradicting the thesis of

evidentialism. At the same time, I think there is a point to the suggestion that a voluntary act, whether physical or mental, requires some kind of practical reason. A mental act is still an *act*, it still involves energy and effort, and it is hard to understand why the voluntariness of an act should not also be understood in terms of its practical motivation, in terms of what the actor sees himself as gaining through the act. This is why I have been willing so far to concede Hieronymi's premise connecting the voluntary with responsiveness to practical reasons. At the same time, a mental act is a distinctive kind of act with norms of its own, and we should not expect the practical reasons that govern it to be identical to those that govern physical acts. I agree with evidentialists such as Adler (2002), invoking Williams (1973), who suggests that one sign that truth is a constitutive norm of belief is that we cannot seem to knowingly choose beliefs that are contrary to the evidence. So I have been led to think more about the practical value of the truth itself. Clearly if it is the practical value *of the truth* that motivates a voluntary act, no one can fault this form of voluntarism for caving in to pragmatist anti-evidentialism.

Before I comment on whether and in what way the value of the truth can be a practical reason, I need to revisit the stakes. Hieronymi (not unlike others) has claimed that believing at will is conceptually *impossible*. I claim that this conclusion does not follow from her premises, because I suggest that it is at least *possible* to believe at will. It is not incumbent on me to show that *all* beliefs are formed in this way. In point of fact I think my case does generalize to much of the wider body of our beliefs, but to respond to Hieronymi's argument, it is sufficient to give a few choice counterexamples. This is important because there are legitimate questions to ask about whether the kind of practical reasoning I am invoking should be understood as a normative (justifying) reason or as a motivating (explanatory) reason. For my purposes, I think it is enough that justifying reasons do sometimes explain our actions. Sometimes, of course, the reasons that explain our actions do not justify them, and vice versa. But clearly sometimes we correctly recognize the value of certain goals, we intend to achieve them, and then our intention to achieve these valuable goals explains our actions. In what follows, I indicate why recognizing the value of the truth may sometimes or even often count as a *practical* reason in the sense of a justifying reason. It is enough that this recognition sometimes motivates us to show that its constitution of the act of believing accounts for the voluntariness of belief.

Most, indeed, will accept that sometimes particular true beliefs are practical. Hieronymi herself accepts that content-related and attitude-related reasons can overlap. But is it their *truth* that is practical, or simply their particular content that is practical? I think it is possible to articulate why truth *as such* is practical, even if it is possible for the practicality of the truth to be sometimes overridden by other practical reasons. On this view, the value of truth as such would be a *pro tanto* practical reason, but a practical reason nonetheless.

To see why the value of truth as such may be a *pro tanto* practical reason, it is worth considering briefly some of the standard counterexamples to the claim. The usual examples are upsetting truths which prompt some to act as if "ignorance is bliss." The stock example is the cheating spouse: William might be more content to evade evidence of Alice's infidelity to avoid the emotional trauma of realizing that she loves another more than she loves him. But these examples are almost invariably tossed off too lightly. First, there is a difference between the practicality of the particular *facts* one believes about and the practicality of *believing* these facts. If truth is *correspondence* of one's beliefs to the facts, then the value of truth rests in one's beliefs being in a certain relation to

the facts, not in the facts themselves.⁶ A cheating spouse is an impractical fact by all accounts, especially in the short term. But *realizing* that one's spouse is cheating, while devastating, has important longer-term practical benefits. The fact that we all must die someday is not a good thing *per se*, but knowing about our mortality can be immensely practical. Knowing its inevitability and its conditions helps us to solve the problems associated with survival and to maximize our time and enjoyment on earth. By the same token, knowing about any particular problem we face in life, whether it is cancer or a budget shortfall or a cheating spouse, gives us the equipment we need either to solve the problem or at least to avoid problems like it in the future.

I suspect that most will acknowledge the practical value of knowing even many "inconvenient truths." But to deepen the point and show that the value of the truth is not simply contingent on cost/benefit analysis, it is worth considering a virtue-epistemological, even virtue-ethical case for the universal value of believing the truth. We need to embrace the truth even in inconvenient or potentially devastating cases, because what we believe affects not only our actions in the near term, but also our *capacity* to believe the truth and to enjoy its benefits in every other case. As Clifford (1901) argued in defense of his all-embracing evidentialism, embracing a baseless belief, even only occasionally, weakens our overall habit of believing on the basis of evidence. Our policies toward some beliefs cannot be isolated from our policies towards others, given that our belief system forms a coherent whole. Think of a baseless belief by analogy to tasty junk food that damages one's stomach. It may not kill one right away, but it damages one's ability to digest other nutritious foods. Likewise, we may not incur immediate practical damage while acting on a belief in a convenient falsehood, but by incurring unhealthy belief-formation habits, we may damage our cognitive ability to benefit from the general practical value of the truth. And the point here is not only psychological, but metaphysical: facts in the world are interconnected with each other, and so to evade one we must evade others, and so on. When we convince ourselves that some facts are too inconvenient to believe, we convince ourselves more generally that reality is our enemy.⁷ But nature to be commanded must be obeyed. If a believer attempts to evade facts on the implicit premise that nature can be commanded out of existence, he is not acting on a practical premise.

So we can make a strong case for the practical value of the truth by situating it with respect to other practical values. Whether the practical values in question relate to material abundance or social relationships, to the extent that achieving them relies on knowing certain means-ends relationships, achieving them often requires knowledge of significant truths. If these other practical concerns can serve as practical reasons, then so can the truth *as such*. Indeed the truth would count as the most all-purpose of practical values, because knowing it is the one condition that the achievement of all of the others presupposes. A being concerned with survival and flourishing whose beliefs correspond with reality is in a better way with reality than one whose beliefs do not.

Some will object that if the apparent consequences of accepting the truth are terrible enough, believing the truth will lose the glimmer of practicality. These examples are easy to manufacture when we imagine evil people manufacturing conditions in which those who believe the truth are punished. I should remind the reader, however,

⁶ I don't think it's too much to assume the correspondence theory of truth for our purposes. Though there is a debate with the pragmatist in the background of this dispute, it is a debate over pragmatic vs. evidentialist conceptions of *justification*, not truth. Contemporary pragmatists about justification are usually willing to take the correspondence theory of truth for granted.

⁷ For a related point in connection with the moral virtue of honesty, see Smith (2003).

that I need only portray recognizing the value of the truth as a *pro tanto* practical reason to make my case (one to which we need only sometimes respond). As such there may be other practical reasons that can override the decisiveness of the value of believing the truth. Now in fact I even question whether the manufactured examples are relevant in any case, since such cases are designed to involve manipulators who *themselves* recognize the value of the truth only to punish someone for pursuing it. In that sense they are parasitic on the value of the truth itself.

The case for the value of believing the truth can probably be expanded beyond the above. Truth may have “intrinsic” practical value in addition merely “instrumental” practical value, in the sense that knowing the world may form a constitutive part of the end of human life, and not just a means to that end. But I cannot expand on this idea further in the present space.

One last question: even if the truth as such is a practical value, how often does recognition of this value include a recognition of its practicality? I think it is clear that ordinary people sometimes recognize the utility of the truth. They recognize it explicitly in social relationships when they maintain that “honesty is the best policy,” and they apply similar considerations in questions about intellectual honesty in practical therapeutic settings (“the first step is admitting you have a problem”). And I think that the *implicit* recognition of the practicality of truth is even more widespread. Evolution has endowed us with a variety of capacities the exercise of which is pleasurable because of the general adaptive value of the capacities. For example, we enjoy exercising our bodies even though we don’t need them as much to work in office settings. By the same token, I don’t think it is indulging in arbitrary evolutionary psychology to propose that we possess a sense of *curiosity* and enjoy pursuing our curiosities because of the obvious adaptive value of the human mind. We should consider that the pleasure of curiosity is an implicit form of recognizing the practical value of truth.

In any case, even if by chance readers do not find the above considerations to be persuasive in support of the practical value of the truth, I remind them of Steup’s proposal, that it may be sufficient for voluntarily formed beliefs to count as such when they are formed immediately in response to *epistemic* reasons, whether these are practical reasons or not. I think this is true at the very least. But the control we exercise over our beliefs is like anything else in our lives: it costs time and energy, and it makes sense that these costs should be born for a practical payoff.

4. Disbelief, refraining from belief, and unjustified belief

So far I have defended the idea that we can believe *p* at will because beliefs formed as a result of recognizing the value of the truth amount to an immediate response to a practical reason. But if we can believe *p* at will, it would seem we should be able to disbelieve *p* at will, or merely refrain from believing *p* at will. And, the argument given so far has at most established the possibility of believing at will *with justification*, but not the possibility of believing at will without justification. In this section I will explain how the argument above can be generalized to the other forms of belief that arise from various attitudes one takes toward the value of the truth, to the extent that one raises or lowers one’s degree of attention to the evidence.⁸

⁸ To say that we raise or lower our level of awareness *at will* would imply that we must also exercise *it* in response to some practical reason. But then there is a question about how we can be aware of that other practical reason if we have not yet raised

The simplest of these cases is disbelief. Disbelief or rejection of p implies the belief that not p . The argument above applied to believing that p applies easily to believing that not p .

Cases of refraining from belief are slightly more complicated. Refraining from belief is an omission not an act. So I need only invoke whatever account we would ordinarily use to understand the voluntariness of omissions. Refraining from belief could be a matter of purposeful suspension of judgment in which one adopts no firm attitude towards either p or not p . This suspension could be either provisional, for the sake of making up one's mind, or as a matter of policy, expressive of philosophical agnosticism. In the first case, suspension of judgment is merely part of a process of inquiry that will settle upon a belief, and its voluntariness can be seen as of a piece with the voluntariness of that process and the resulting belief, elsewhere described. In the second case, I think it is best to understand the voluntariness more specifically as the result of the voluntariness of the agnostic's belief that no knowledge is possible (or desirable), which would be dealt with, once again, either as a belief with or without justification.

But there is also a kind of *de facto* agnosticism, a failure to commit to either p or not p that occurs not because of suspension of judgment for the sake of inquiry, or as a matter of explicit agnostic policy, but through sheer drift or mental laziness. Actually, one can stumble into beliefs through the same kind of drift or laziness as well, by exercising injudicious attention to the evidence or by carelessly applying known methods of inquiry. In the case where mental drift amounts a lazy posture of not believing, we need only account for the voluntariness of that posture, not for any mental act or product. But then because there is no belief whose voluntariness I need to account for, nothing like the argument in the previous section is needed. No one thinks there is a special problem for accounting for the voluntariness of acts of inquiry, or the simple failure to engage in such acts. The only problem is how such acts might involve the right motivation to partially constitute acts of believing.

Some cases of unjustified belief are easy to handle. These include especially beliefs adopted through a process of careful inquiry in which the inquirer, due to temporary distraction or a momentary lapse in attention, trips up in the act of assessing the evidence. This is often what occurs when one relies on logical fallacies. Many fallacies superficially resemble logical patterns of reasoning, and rely on this resemblance for their effectiveness, a form of epistemic parasitism. (A simple example is the appeal to irrelevant authority, which superficially resembles reliable testimony.) In these cases, the inquirer *is* still motivated by the value of believing the truth, but slips up in its

our awareness. This is a classic regress problem for practical reasons, similar to problem that motivates foundationalists about epistemic reasons. A solution similar to the epistemic foundationalist's is in the offing here. There must be a basic form of (mental) acting at will that does not involve response to a practical reason, a form of willing that is the *making* of a practical reason for oneself, but which still provides other acts with practical justification: think of as the same choice we make when we continue to accept reality by living in it.

Of course we do not will to raise our level of awareness in complete cognitive vacuum, just as we do not form basic epistemic beliefs in a vacuum. The choice to raise our level of awareness is primarily a choice to engage our conceptual faculty: not just the choice to focus on our perceptual data, but to form concepts, apply them, consider their logical implications and their interrelationship to the rest of our knowledge (see e.g., Bayer 2011). This means we begin at least with perceptual awareness and with the automatized processes of the subconscious. Perceptual data does suggest its own implications or the stakes involved in searching for these, but the subconscious mind can. Unless we are a newborn, we have formed automatic associations that give us "hunches" or "gut feelings"—or "nagging doubts"—about what the truth might be. Arguably these count as a form of pre-conceptual awareness of the need to know the truth on some matter, in response to which we either raise or lower our level of awareness.

determination.⁹ We call such beliefs “unjustified” in the sense that an inquirer could have avoided the error, but the blame is only slight because the error was not committed through gross epistemic negligence or malice. Because the belief is the result of a deliberate process of inquiry and motivated by the truth, it is still voluntary in the relevant sense.¹⁰

The harder case is beliefs stumbled into accidentally as a result of mental drift. For example, suppose that William catches a glance from Alice and begins a process of pure wishful thinking whereby he believes that she is his next wife. Such a belief is not adopted because of a deliberate process of inquiry, and certainly not because of a *commitment* to the value of believing the truth. For this reason the argument in the previous section will not account for its voluntariness. This is not, I think, a problem, because there is an important sense in which such a belief is *not* fully voluntary. It is clearly the product of a voluntary failure to engage one’s mind, but in failing to do this one leaves one’s mind open to the influence of chance emotional and social accidents. Here, I think, we blame the believer for having an unjustified belief, but only in the same way that we blame a drunk driver for the unjustified act of killing a pedestrian. The drunk driver did not set out to kill any particular person or to kill at all, but did choose to surrender control of his car—just as the mental drifter has surrendered control of his mind to chance factors rather than evidence. The blame we assign to such an unjustified belief is then blame assigned to cognitive negligence, or believing “under the influence” of one’s prejudices. Interestingly, the extent to which these beliefs are not products of a commitment to the truth is then also the extent to which they are not fully *beliefs*. This is fine, I think, because in an important sense beliefs that are unjustified in this way are only beliefs by derivative courtesy. As Hieronymi and Bennett insist, belief *qua* belief aims at truth, and these do not. Aiming at the truth is a constitutive norm of believing. Just as someone who rides a bike poorly is not really riding a bike (say, if he doesn’t know how to balance himself), someone who forms beliefs poorly is not really believing either.

There are also unjustified mental states whose unjustifiedness is of a higher degree than that associated with accident or negligence. These are beliefs adopted through willful evasion of the evidence—here the analogy is to second degree murder or worse, where the believer is blamed on the grounds of epistemic malice aforethought. Consider William’s evasion of evidence of Alice’s infidelity in order to content himself in the belief that his spouse is faithful. In such cases, he is clearly not acting mentally from a will to believe the truth, but a will to avoid the truth. Pragmatic, “extrinsic” reasons dominate his ulterior motivation. Here then, one clearly cannot account for the voluntariness of the belief easily through the argument in the previous section. According to that argument, belief adopted because of an extrinsic pragmatic reason cannot be a belief, for the reasons derived from Bernard Williams that Hieronymi has repeatedly invoked. And just as beliefs formed through drift are not fully beliefs aiming at the truth, the same applies in a more pronounced form to beliefs formed through evasion.

⁹ Of course the more blatantly obvious the fallacy, the more negligence is required to commit it, so beliefs based on fallacies may also fall into the more category of more harshly unjustified beliefs we are about to examine.

¹⁰ There is a sense in which it is not voluntary—the same sense in which the result of an accidental death is not voluntary. The sincere believer who trips up in applying a method is responsible for having *that belief (de re)*, but is not responsible for its content (*de dicto*). Because *that belief* is in fact reached through an erroneous application of a method, we blame the inquirer for this error (though not much, since it is not an error characteristic of the person or a product of his motive in this case).

But there is still a sense in which evasive beliefs can be regarded as beliefs in a parasitical way. Recall that the crux of Williams' argument is that we cannot *in full consciousness* regard anything acquired in defiance of the evidence as a belief. There both Williams and Hieronymi are importantly correct. But I would point out that there are beliefs that can be adopted *without full consciousness* of how they are formed, and these are especially likely to include beliefs resulting from evasion of the evidence, where one is often not only unaware of the evidence, but deceiving oneself into thinking that one is being sincere. One who ignores evidence of a cheating spouse might, for instance, do so by rationalizing the evidence away, by constructing wildly arbitrary explanations, supplemented by ridiculous auxiliary hypotheses: "*Maybe this evidence was planted to frame Alice, and there is a way into the house I don't know about.*"¹¹ Etc. By explaining the evidence away, one can make oneself feel that one is not ignoring the evidence—after all, the evidence is made to look irrelevant. But the process by which one constructs these alternative explanations is itself in defiance of the evidence, though it may not seem like it to the believer at the time. So, evasive beliefs are still *beliefs* even though they don't result from a commitment to the truth, because they are products of one's deceiving oneself into *thinking* that one is committed to the truth. But it is true that these beliefs are only beliefs in an extremely parasitic, derivative way.¹²

Of course the power of self-deception is limited. It is hard to say how far one's beliefs can depart from the evidence before one cannot help but realize that one is willfully evading evidence. But wherever that point is, William's argument will apply to rule out the existence of such beliefs, and no tweaking of the argument above will allow for the voluntariness of such beliefs. This is not a problem for my position, however, but a limiting case. Nothing can count as a cognitively meaningful belief that *p* which is motivated by a sheer will to avoid the truth, by brazen disregard of the evidence. I suspect that many of the claims sometimes criticized as "unfalsifiable" (as "not even false") fall into this category. We may affirm *p* in words, both to ourselves and to others. We may even believe that we believe that *p*. But if it is entirely hostile to the evidence, it is not a belief at all. What goes through our mind is nothing of cognitive value, nothing that is true or false, justified or unjustified. So the resulting state is willed (for purely pragmatic extrinsic reasons), but it is not a willed belief.

Every case of a genuine belief, whether justified or unjustified, can be understood as willed either as a result of being enacted in response to a will to believe the truth or at least a *putative* will to believe the truth. In the latter case, this is only possible by self-deception. Without self-deception, rampant departure from the evidence makes belief impossible, and only one's words will count as voluntary. Willing belief in a specific proposition in

¹¹ For an account of why "maybes" like these are themselves inconsistent with evidentialist norms, see Bayer (Unpublished—A). Note that in the theory adopted by this paper, these "maybes" are not themselves cognitive beliefs. That is not inconsistent with my current point: these epistemic pseudo-possibilities may be non-cognitive, but to a point they may be used to facilitate the lack of awareness that makes genuine cognitive belief contrary to the evidence possible.

¹² Curiously, one philosopher who acknowledges the importance of self-deception here is Adler (2002), an evidentialist *critic* of voluntarism. Adler argues that truth is a constitutive norm of belief, and argues for this by appealing to the impossibility of belief in defiance of the evidence. But he also has to answer the objection that there seem to be many people who have real beliefs that are wildly at odds with the evidence. Adler suggests that many of these may still count as beliefs, but only because they are formed through self-deception, such that believers do not realize that these beliefs are contrary to the evidence. He devotes the better part of a chapter to explaining the variety of forms of self-deception that are possible in belief-formation (2002, 73–101). Oddly, he does not seem to notice that if these beliefs can be adopted without full awareness of their departure from the evidence, they can still count as beliefs in the parasitic form I have outlined above.

full consciousness contrary to all evidence is impossible. If we could do such a thing, it would not be a belief. Evidentialists are correct to cite this point as showing that the norm of belief is truth and evidence. But it does not imply that no beliefs can be willed.

6. Conclusion

I began this paper insisting that I wanted to find wisdom in Hieronymi's argument, even while disagreeing with her thesis that it is impossible to believe at will. Indeed, her argument against the possibility of believing at will is correct to a point: it is correct about beliefs motivated by pragmatic extrinsic reasons where self-deception can no longer allow one to evade how much one's belief has departed from the evidence. These may involve managerial control, but they are not beliefs formed at will. But I have also argued that Hieronymi has overlooked the possibility of a practical reason that is constitutive of believing, the commitment to the value of believing the truth.

I hope I have also shown some of the more interesting implications of an evidentialism structured around the possibility of believing at will. Evidentialism is, after all, a normative thesis, that there are certain things we should and should not believe. Evidentialism added to voluntarism becomes the thesis that what we should believe is what we should *choose* to believe. We cannot choose to believe something in utter defiance of the evidence, but within the scope of a devotion to the value of the truth, there is a range within which I would argue we have the autonomous ability to choose to "believe it, or not."

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